Brian Hayek

Stepping Back in Time Along the Appalachian Trail

A view of Greenbrier Lake from Annapolis Rocks. Photo by Michael Warren, courtesy Appalachian Trail Conference.

In October 1862, a young man wrote a letter to his father about a day he spent near what is now the Appalachian National Scenic Trail at Fox Gap in Maryland:

> We rushed onto them everyone for himself—all loading & firing as fast as he could see a Rebel to shoot at .... The firing encreased tenfold, then it sounded like the rolls of thunder—and all the time every man shouting as loud as he could. I got rather more excited than I wish to again.

The young man was William Brearley, a Union private in the Civil War. He was describing his first fighting action, at the Battle of South Mountain, a bloody ridgetop brawl in which nearly 40,000 men fought and more than 3,000 died.

From the Mahoosuc Mountains and the Kennebec River in the north to the Great Smoky Mountains in the South, the Appalachian Trail is physically challenging. On South Mountain, a 1,500-foot-high ridge that extends through Maryland from the Potomac River north to Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley, the challenge is that and more. For, if a hiker takes some time on this ridge and cups a hand to the ear, he or she may still hear the revelry from a colonial roadhouse, the marching of British Redcoats, and the clash of Civil War bayonets.

Separating the Civilizations

The Appalachian Trail (known affectionately as the "AT") in Maryland, winding for 38 miles along the crest of South Mountain, is a modern guide along a great 18th-century cultural divide. A person who stood on this mountain in the early 1700s had a choice to make: to the east was the settled, safe seaboard—to the west, untamed wilderness. Those few who crossed the ridge were considered pioneers—from there on west they were on their own against the elements and the Indians they would encounter there.

The 18th-century pioneering spirit was strong, but when Indians teamed with the French in the 1750s to defend territory west of the Blue Ridge, the "climate" became hostile. England sent one of its best-known generals, Edward Braddock, with 1,000 British regulars to seize control of the land. As the ranks of red-coated British made their way west, they crossed South Mountain at Tumers Gap (by the Trail, 17.2 miles north of Harpers Ferry, WV). Braddock and his men were the first recorded white men to cross through the Gap on what later came to be known as the National Road. First an Indian or game trail, the National Road (now U.S. Route 40A) became a major east-west thoroughfare during westward expansion.

The young George Washington was an aide to General Braddock during the British campaign. Although he warned Braddock that his men's brightly colored coats and method of fighting in ranks made them vulnerable to Indian ambush, Braddock ignored the warning. He was later ambushed and killed near Uniontown, Pennsylvania.

The (almost) Great Whiskey Rebellion

Some 50 years later, settlers near South Mountain found a different cause for which to fight. Frontier farmers here and elsewhere relied on whiskey as a medium of exchange. Sending grain to eastern markets was too costly; by converting grain into whiskey, the farmers found a commodity that was easily stored and transported. When a tax was placed on whiskey in 1794, western Pennsylvania farmers rebelled. Tax collectors were tarred and feathered or run off with muskets. Farmer-distillers in Washington County, Md., similarly enraged with the new tax, organized and marched on nearby Frederick. When they learned that 500 federal soldiers were waiting in the city, the rioters disbanded and returned to their homes.

Railroad in the Sky

Prior to the Civil War, the Appalachian Trail's South Mountain ridge was used as a segment of the "Underground Railroad" by which southern black slaves escaped to freedom in Canada. Hundreds of slaves escaped through Maryland during the mid-1800s, probably through the valleys that parallel South Mountain. While the thickly wooded mountains provided the perfect cover for fleeing fugitives, it also provided a perfect hiding place for bounty hunters. On the eve of the Civil War, raiders who escaped from John

Photo and detail of the War Correspondents Arch at Crampton Gap.Photo courtesy Appalachian Trail Conference.

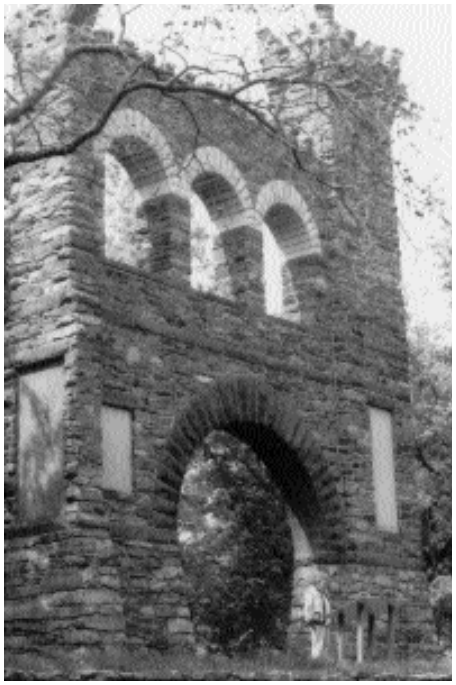
Brown's unsuccessful attack on Harpers Ferry followed this route north.

The Civil War: The Battle For South Mountain

The major Civil War event on South Mountain's stony spine was a clash at three saddles in the South Mountain skyline: Crampton Gap, Fox Gap, and Turners Gap. After the battle of Second Manassas (Bull Run) in Northern Virginia, a significant victory for the Confederacy, the demoralized Union army was put under the command of General George McClellan. General Robert E. Lee of the Confederates decided to take advantage of southern momentum and crossed the Potomac River into Maryland. After a short occupation of Frederick, Lee divided his army. Some headed southwest to secure Harpers Ferry, the railroad, and the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal for the Confederacy—the rest moved northwest to Hagerstown, Maryland.

Lee's plans were detailed in "Special Orders No. 191," which he distributed to his generals. One of General D. H. Hill's staff officers wrapped a copy of the orders around three cigars and mistakenly left it behind in Frederick. Four days later, the Confederate strategy was in the hands of the Union army. Had McClellan moved swiftly with his new-found information, it is believed that he could have swept over South Mountain and caught a divided Confederate army. Instead, Lee, informed of the Union movements, ordered the defense of Turners Gap and recalled all but one of his Hagerstown brigades.

When the Union army was ordered to drive the Confederates off the mountain, the fighting began. The Confederate defensive line extended eight miles from Turners Gap in the north to Crampton Gap in the south. The fighting lasted all day on September 14, 1862, and was often fierce. Among those on the mountain that day was Union General Jesse Reno, who was killed at Fox Gap.



"This brilliant service cost us the life of that pure, gallant, and accomplished Christian soldier, General Garland, who had no superior and few equals in the service. The Yankees, on their side, lost General Reno, a renegade Virginian, who was killed by a happy shot from the 23rd North Carolina," wrote General D.H. Hill. A monument exists today near the spot at Fox Gap where Gen. Reno fell.

Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes was wounded at South Mountain; a musket ball broke his elbow. The future president spent the next couple of weeks recuperating at a private home in nearby Middletown.

In the end, the Union Army prevailed at South Mountain. With his army still divided and the Army of the Potomac (nearly 90,000 strong) just over the ridge, an anxious General Lee pulled his troops off the slope of South Mountain and regrouped about six miles west at Antietam Creek, near a small town called Sharpsburg. There, three days later, on September 17, 1862, the two armies clashed again in the single bloodiest day of the Civil War.

The Civil War: Wise's Well

Following the Battle for South Mountain, thousands of dead were left on the ridges, and the tremendous task of burial was left to the occupying Union forces. Although some specific facts of the story have been disputed, several accounts corroborate a ghastly use of an old well at the farm of Daniel Wise near Fox Gap, where much of the fighting took place. Samuel Compton, a soldier in the 12th Ohio Regiment, recorded this in his journal on September 16, 1862:

> On the morning of the 16th, I strolled out to see them bury the Confederate dead. I saw but I never want to [see] another [such] sight. The squad I saw were armed with pick & canteen full of whiskey, the whiskey the most necessary of the two. The bodies had become so offensive that men could only endure it by being staggering drunk. To see men stagger up to corpses and strike four or five times before they could get ahold, a right hold being one above the belt. Then staggering, as every drunk will, they dragged the corpses to a 60-foot well and tumbled them in. What a sepulcher & what a burial! You don't wonder I had not appetite for supper!

In all, more than 60 bodies were said to have been dumped in the well for the price of a dollar a head to Daniel Wise. They were later removed, and today nothing remains of the well or the farm.

The Old South Mountain Inn

Just west of where the AT crosses Route 40A, at the crest of Turners Gap, is the Old South Mountain Inn. Much of the history of the mountain itself surrounds the Inn, which may have been built as early as the 1750s. With its prominent position on top of the airy ridge, it was a major stopping-point along this country's first national east-west road. The Inn played host to many history-makers, including Presidents

Jackson, Harrison, Polk, Taylor, Van Buren, and Lincoln, when he was a congressman. The tavern was also a favorite haunt of Daniel Webster and Henry Clay.

South Mountain Inn was used as headquarters for D.H. Hill as he fought the Union in the Battle for South Mountain. In fact, he put cooks, carriage drivers, and dismounted aides out behind two cannons to make a show of there being more Confederate troops in the gap than there actually were (before General James Longstreet arrived from Hagerstown).

Owners changed through the years. One owner, Madeline Vinton Dahlgren, was a prominent Washington, DC, socialite. Her husband, Admiral John A. B. Dahlgren, developed the Dahlgren gun that was used by the armies and navies of both the Union and Confederacy. As part of her "sky farm," which included the Inn, Madeline Dahlgren had a stone chapel built in 1881, so that residents would have a nearby church. This chapel, now restored, is just a few steps away from the AT and open to visitors on weekends.

Today, the Old South Mountain Inn is again a place where weary travelers (including hikers) can enjoy food and drink. The Inn also is a focal point for many legends and folklore about the mountain.

The Milk Bottle and the Arch

About a mile north of Turners Gap, the Appalachian Trail leads the hiker past the first monument ever erected to George Washington. Although part of the foundation was laid on July 3, 1827, the 15-foot-high, milk-bottle-shaped monument was mostly built and dedicated on July 4 that year (15 more feet were added later). A journalist in Boonsboro, Maryland, wrote the next day:

> At the conclusion of our labors, about 4 o'clock, the Declaration of Independence was read from one of the steps of the monument, preceded by some prefactory [sic] observations, after which several salutes of infantry were fired, when we all returned to town in good order ....

The Monument has taken its place in history since that Fourth of July. "Wicked boys who did not know who Washington was" took delight in dislodging boulders from the monument and watching them roll down the mountain. Almost in ruins, it was used as a Union observation post during the battles of Antietam and Gettysburg. Since the Civil War, the monument has been twice rebuilt: once in 1881 and again in 1937 by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC rebuilt it by laying a new foundation, removing and numbering its original stones, and replacing them in their original positions with a concrete bond.

Another substantial South Mountain monument stands in Crampton Gap, south of Tumers Gap. The War Correspondents Arch is not easy for a hiker to miss: it stands guard directly adjacent to the Appalachian Trail at Crampton Gap. Erected in 1896, it was then the largest on any Civil War battlefield, yet it did not pay tribute to any regiment, soldier, or state. It was planned and built by George Alfred Townsend, a political journalist and columnist from 1866 to 1910, as a tribute to 157 reporters and artists who covered the Civil War from both sides of the conflict. The monument stands 50 feet high and 40 feet wide. Its chief features are a 16-foot-high Moorish arch with three smaller Roman arches above it.

Desiring an attractive location close to Antietam and other Civil War sites, Townsend (whose pen name was "Gath"), built not only the arch but an entire estate. Part of his original "Gathland" estate is now a Maryland state park.

Beyond the Topos

These are only some of the highlights of South Mountain's fascinating past. Hikers speak of mountains in terms of their ups and their downs, their springs, and their shelters. Just as interesting is their heritage. While South Mountain may boast a more varied history than other sections of the Appalachian Trail, every mountain has its own story to tell. How fascinating it is to listen!

Old South Mountain Inn. Photo courtesy Appalachian Trail Conference.

Brian Hayek is a hiker and writer from Catonsville, Maryland. He participated in the 1993 Mountain Club of Maryland hike across the state. This article was adapted from "Stepping Back in Time: A Hike Through History on the Crest of Maryland's South Mountain," which appeared in the Appalachian Trailway News, *March/April, 1995. Information about South Mountain was gathered from many sources, including Paula Strain's* The Blue Hills of Maryland, History Along the Appalachian Trail on South Mountain and the Catoctins. *Ms. Strain is a member of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club.*